DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 270 777 CS 209 829

AUTHOR Stacks, Don W.; Wright, Donald K.
TITLE A Study of Reactions to Ethical Dilemmas in Public Relations.
PUB DATE 5 Aug 86
NOTE 21p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the Association for Education in Journalism and Mass Communication (69th, Norman, OK, August 3-6, 1986).
PUB TYPE Speeches/Conference Papers (150) -- Reports - Research/Technical (143)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Codes of Ethics; College Students; Confidentiality; *Ethical Instruction; *Ethics; Higher Education; *Journalism Education; Mass Media; Moral Development; Moral Values; Publicity; *Public Relations; Values Education

ABSTRACT

In order to justify ethical instruction for media students, 109 university students in basic communication courses were asked to confront a moral-ethical problem, specifically, the request for information that a sponsoring company or organization wished suppressed. Respondents were randomly assigned to one of four conditions: working for a public organization or working for a private organization and deciding about the firing of a coach, and working in either situation and deciding about about nuclear waste disposal. Based on these situations and similar earlier research by Ryan and Martinson (1984), the two hypotheses proposed that (1) responses to the situations will differ significantly depending on whether or not the situation is public or private, with those responding to the commercial interests less willing to give information to the public; and (2) responses to the coach firing will differ significantly from responses to the nuclear waste situation because the "need to know" about nuclear waste will compel subjects to release information. Responses did not support the first hypothesis, though the second was supported. However, the students indicated more uncertainty than the public relations practitioners in Ryan and Martinson's study, which suggests a need for teaching ethics in university-based communication programs. (SRT)

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A STUDY OF REACTIONS TO

ETHICAL DILEMMAS IN PUBLIC RELATIONS

Don W. Stacks
School of Communication
University of Alabama
University, AL 35486
(205) 348-8074

Donald K. Wright
Department of Communication Arts
University of South Alabama
Mobile, AL 36688
(205) 460-6301

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A paper

Presented to the Public Relations Division,

Association for Education in Journalism and Mass Communication,

1986 Annual Convention

Norman, Oklahoma

August 5, 1986

CS209 829

A STUDY OF REACTIONS TO ETHICAL DILEMMAS IN PUBLIC RELATIONS

Abstract

This study presents results of research aimed at examining the ethical decisions public relations preprofessionals may be faced with later in their careers. Subjects were required to respond to one of four requests for information in which they were told not to reply by their "organization." Findings supported earlier research which found that for practicing public relations personal moral-ethical values override organizational concerns. Implications of the findings were discussed.

Recently Ryan and Martinson reported a study in which public relations practitioners were asked to confront a moral-ethical problem.[1] In their study Ryan and Martinson examined the problems associated with individual relativism (or subjectivism theory) when confronted with a request for information a sponsoring company or organization wished suppressed. Based on their findings it was suggested that it might be advisable to adopt a moral-ethical theory of public relations, replacing the prevailing subjectivism theory with more emphasis on accountability than loyalty to higher authority.

The purpose of this study was to replicate and extend Ryan and Martinson's findings. In particular we were interested in the notion of teaching ethics to future media practitioners. We reasoned that students would be a particularly good population since they (1) are bombarded constantly by public relations practitioners and (2) have not had the professional experiences with which to make ethical judgments. Additionally, we were concerned about the effect of teaching ethics to media

students. It seemed that Ryan and Martinson's findings could, if replicated, establish a basis for ethical training programs.

Although there once was a time when our society appeared to question whether or not ethics were cognitive, there is relative agreement today that ethics can be taught. Kohlberg's elaborate cognitive-developmental theory of moralization is the pacesetter of this accord.[2] Even before Kohlberg, however, there was strong support for teaching ethics.[3]

It would appear that most media students are taught the ethical philosophy of objectivity but public relations students often are taught subjectivism along with objectivity. Subjectivism is a concept theory emphasizing individual relativism, a theory positing that each of us is responsible for our own actions.[4] The actions taken by the public relations practitioner are those that can be lived with. Further, it is apparent that each of us has a breaking point, a point beyond which we cannot go due to consciousness, dissonance, or whatever. The crux of the matter is that two factors must be taken into consideration when examining the subjectivism position: the needs of the practitioner (i.e., keeping the job) and the needs of the public (as opposed to the needs of the company).

When a public relations practitioner is faced with an ethical problem he or she can look back and make a judgment based on past experience. The media student, however, does not have that experience upon which to draw. The ethical choices learned must be found in the classroom. Whether or not media students are being taught ethics, however, has not been clearly established. Within the basic media sequence some treatment of ethics is <u>probably</u> studied, but to what effect? Part of this study sought to answer that question.

Although students and practitioners in all aspects of mass communication claim concern for "the public good," public relations people

and other media persons -- journalists, broadcasters, etc. -- historically have been at odds as their interpretations of how to bring about such good.[5] It appears those who work in public relations generally view themselves as ethical and responsible people, but many journalists and other media persons often believe public relations practitioners have minimal ethics and morals.[6] The reasons for this disagreement are many. Public relations today covers a wide range of concerns forcing practitioners to act constantly, and in all sorts of situations, including some where there is clouded judgment on what is right or wrong; good or bad; ethical or unethical.[7]

For decades, public relations practitioners have played a major role in providing the news media with much of the information it passes along to the mass public.[8] In his study of media people and public relations practitioners, Aranoff discovered differences in the perception of each other's "news values," which suggest the existence of varying ethical perspectives.[9] Empirical evidence concerning ethical judgments in the media and public relations, however, is relatively recent. Hulteng, Swain, Mills, Goodwin, Meyer, and Hartley have all reported on quantitative surveys of journalists concerning ethical questions in journalism.[10] In addition, Wright has empirically addressed the ethical question of ethics and public relations practitioners.[11]

The strains existing between the perceived roles of the "objective" journalists and the "subjective" public relations practitioners has been addressed in earlier studies, where differences were found between public relations practitioners with previous news experience and those without such work.[12] It is also important to emphasize that many media students eventually enter public relations work simply because there are more

employment opportunities available in public relations than in most other aspects of journalism and mass communication.[13]

The research reported here sought to answer two questions posed by Ryan and Martinson which impact on the teaching of ethics, only with a population of information receivers and future practitioners. We reasoned that Ryan and Martinson's experimental materials offered a chance to compare responses of public relations practitioners and to extend their findings to those preparing for the media professions.

Ryan and Martinson used as their stimulus material two hypothetical situations. In one situation public relations practitioners were asked to make ethical decisions about the firing of a football coach; in the other, decisions were required about disposing of nuclear wastes. Additionally, the situations are further broken down into two subcategories where either the organization involved is a public, nonprofit organization or a private, profit-making organization. Ryan and Martinson hypothesized that public relations practitioners see major differences between public and private organizations and their public relations needs. <u>They failed to confirm this hypothesis</u>. Ryan and Martinson did find support, however, for an hypothesis that responses to the situation dealing with a public's need to know (i.e., nuclear waste) would differ from those of a more private nature (i.e., firing of a coach).

Ryan and Martinson based their first hypothesis on the assumption that practitioners "see major differences between public relations for public and for private groups and institutions."[14] Failure to support this hypothesis may have been due in part to past experience and of having worked for both public and private organizations. The student, on the other hand, does not have this experience and may view the two more cynically; that is, the student (and consumer) may see major differences between private and public

needs as far as public relations needs are concerned. Hence, the first hypothesis is:

> Responses to the situations will differ significantly depending on whether or not the situation is public or private. Further, those responding to the commercial interests will be less willing to be open with the public.

The second hypothesis posits a difference between that which affects the general population and that which affects only a few. Specifically, the degree to which the public relations person response affects the general welfare of the public will impact on the ethical decision whether to be open with the public or not. Hence, the second hypothesis is:

> Responses to the coach firing situation will differ significantly from responses to the nuclear waste situation, with those responding to the nuclear waste problem indicating a greater willingness to be open with the public.

Method

Respondents

Respondents were 109 students enrolled in basic communication courses at a large southeastern university. Students were enrolled in either the introductory mass communication course or the first public relations course.

Independent Variables

Respondents were randomly assigned to one of four conditions (coach firing public, coach firing private, nuclear waste public, and nuclear waste private) across both courses. Each stimulus situation consisted of a vignette outlining the ethical dilemma faced by the public relations officer.

In the case of the coach firing two vignettes were prepared outlining a coach being relieved of duties, but given another position within the organization. In one vignette the coach is a member of a privately-owned, semi-professional team; in the other he is coach of a basketball team at a small four-year public institution. In both vignettes the coach is popular with the fans but has had continual budget problems. Each is given the choice of "voluntary" resignation and taking another position in the organization or fighting the organization's attempts at firing him while still under contract. Each decides to resign and the public relations officer is told to limit publicity and to tell the media only that the coach resigned to take another position. In each vignette the public relations person is contacted by a reporter on to the story and must decide how to react.

The nuclear waste vignette places the needs of the public against the needs of getting funding for research. In both cases the dump necessary for the safe removal of nuclear waste is being closed. Notification of the waste dump's closing comes two days before legislation is to be enacted providing the organization funding for important research. In both vignettes the public relations officer is told to make no announcement concerning the waste dump's closing, but a reporter later contacts the officer asking about the dump's closing. The respondent is then asked how to respond.

Dependent Measures

All respondents were asked to indicate their agreement or disagreement to seven statements on a five-point Likert-like (strongly agree to strongly disagree) concerning the action to be taken. Additionally, respondents were asked to specify one of five possible outcomes for the public relations officer: delay the request, tell the real story, resign and not talk to the media, resign and talk to the media, or take some other action.

Results

Manipulation Check

Because respondents were drawn from two different courses (introduction to media and introduction to public relations) it was deemed necessary to test for a possible difference between courses. As noted earlier, although most media students end up in public relations-like positions, there existed the clear possibility that the two courses may have influenced the results. No significant differences between courses were found for any dependent variable.

Hypotheses

Analysis of the three hypotheses were conducted out via t-tests on each statement. The first hypothesis, which predicted responses would differ depending on the public or private nature of the situation, was not supported. Mean responses clearly indicate no real difference in perceptions of differences between the needs of corporate versus public relations (See Table 1). Support was found for the second hypothesis, which predicted differences based on the need of the public to know (See Table 1). Significant differences ($p < .05$) were found for

statement 1 ($t = 6.30$), 4 ($t = -6.22$), and 5 ($t = -3.97$), while statement 2 approached significance ($t = 1.30$, $p < .10$). As indicated in Table 2, those responding to the coach firing situation agreed that the public relations director should abide with the coaches' wish not to reveal the real facts, while those responding to the nuclear waste situation were more uncertain about that same request from the dump site operator and officials.

Place Table 1 Here

Statement 4 asked whether or not the public relations director should comply abide with the wishes of the officials, regardless of why the request was made. Again, those responding to the coach firing situation felt the public relations director should abide by management's wishes. Those responding to the nuclear waste situation, however, were more uncertain (a mean response of 4.28 for the coach firing compared to 3.10 for the nuclear waste situation).

Respondents to the coach firing situation disagreed with the statement that public relations directors are justified telling the truth if they think officials and the coach are misleading the public. Those responding to the nuclear waste site situation leaned toward agreement with the statement.

No differences were found between responses to the remaining statements, although responses to statement 2, which stated the public relations director is justified in misleading the reporter since he or she is only acting as a representative for others, approached significance with respondents to the coach firing situation agreeing with the statement and those responding to the nuclear waste situation more uncertain. All

respondents were uncertain whether the public relations director is justified in misleading the reporter because he or she is merely protecting others. All respondents agreed that the public relations director should tell the appropriate officials before explaining the real situation. All respondents felt the public relations director should sit down with the officials and try to convince them to release the facts.

Because there was a possibility that perceptions of situation may have been influenced by the public or private nature of the organization, each statement was submitted to a 2 (public-private) x 2 (coach-waste) Analysis of Variance. Significant interactions were obtained for statements 1 and 6. When probed with Fisher's LSD test for multiple comparisons, statement 6 failed to yield significant differences. Further analysis on statement 1 failed to yield any further information as the means for the public (2.17) and the private (1.80) coach firing situations did not differ, nor did the means for the public (3.03) and the private (3.50) nuclear waste situation differ.

Tables 2 and 3 present the results of the recommendations made if the public relations director failed to convince the officials according to the public/private nature of the organization. Analysis of each situation by nature of the organization failed to yield any significant differences for either the coach firing situation (chi square = 1.86, df = 4) or the nuclear waste situation (chi square = 2.31, df = 4). Thus, Hypothesis 1 cannot be supported either on the basis of the question of ethics or the actions recommended for the public relations director.

Place Tables 2 and 3 Here

However, an analysis of recommendations yielded significant differences

when examining just the coach firing and the nuclear waste situations (chi square = 13.36, df = 4, $p < .01$), providing additional support for Hypothesis 1. As shown in Table 4, 48% felt the public relations director should go along with management's requests with 62% responding to the coach firing situation recommending this action, while only 32% recommended a similar strategy for the nuclear waste. Only 10 percent thought the public relations director should tell the real story, with 5% responding to the coach firing situation and 16% responding to the nuclear waste situation advocating that position. Thirteen percent recommended that the public relations director should resign and not talk to the press (13% from the coach firing situation and 12% from the nuclear waste situation); five percent recommended resignation and telling the real story (2% from the coach firing situation and 10% from the nuclear waste situation). Twenty-three percent offered alternative recommendations (18% from the coach firing situation and 30% from the nuclear waste situation).

Place Table 4 Here

Discussion

Ryan and Martinson discovered that public relations people respond differently to various moral and ethical dilemmas, and reported that many believe they are accountable to "an authority higher than management." The study reported in this paper provides some replication of the Ryan and Martinson results. It appears that media students hold similar base line ethical-moral postures with the public relations practitioners studied previously.

However, it also appears that the experience practitioners have in decision-making situations helps them tackle decisions which must be made in the area of ethics and morals. We believe the students surveyed reflect the average student and that such students do not possess the same degree of ethical-moral decision-making confidence discovered among practitioners by Ryan and Martinson.

Perhaps practitioners, who regularly have to make decisions in many aspects of their daily jobs, are much more adept at responding to ethical-moral decision making. The practitioner knows that he or she must make a decision and that decision, after a time, reflects the possible problems associated with ethical-moral problems. The student, however, must deal with some idealized form of experience, perhaps responding in an "if this were to happen to me I'd respond ethically."

Based on the student responses, it appears that their ethical decisions may be made on guidelines less rigid than those held by the practitioner. If this can be further verified through research sampling both professional and student samples, it would provide considerable support for the argument that ethics should be taught in university-based communication programs. That the results of this research support those of Ryan and Martinson suggest that an ethical-moral base line may exist which needs further examination. At what level should ethics be examined? What effect would a course in ethics have on decisions such as those asked in this research? Would such results differ from those of practitioners?

Although our study's analysis of a five-point Likert-like scale differed from that used earlier (a four-point response was used in the analysis with "undecided" or "unknown" responses removed from the analysis), we believe it safe to suggest that media students apparently do not feel as strongly about concealing information as do the public relations practitioners. Of course,

the idealistic and more theoretical viewpoints of the media students were expected to be less pragmatic than those of the practitioners. The degree of difference cannot be assessed but might make for an interesting study in the future.

All in all the media students in general seem to react similarly to the practitioners, however, there are differences in the degree of agreement or recommendation. In attempting to discover if differences existed between media students and those intending to emphasize public relations studies, we examined responses from each group but found no significant differences on any ethical-moral statement or recommendation for action.

This study leads to a number of questions which could be tackled in future research. Do nonprofessionals vary in the way they see public relations practitioners working? Do they see moral-ethical differences in vignette and situation? How close or far are these perceptions to each other? What is the effect of a course in ethics?

This study sought to expand Ryan and Martinson's initial research on public relations practitioners to future users and practitioners of public relations. Based on the findings obtained it appears that both practitioner and student have a base line ethical-moral position. Although no direct comparison can be made between practitioner and student, the decisions made by the student reflect those of the practitioner. Future research should examine how and why such decisions are made by both groups.

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Table 1

Responses to Statements Outlining Possible
Reactions to Requests to Suppress Information

	Coach Firing			Nuclear Waste		
Item	Private	Public	Combined	Private	Public	Combined
1	1.80	2.17	2.02*	3.50	3.03	3.22*
2	2.24	2.40	2.23	2.75	2.53	2.62
3	3.11	3.08	3.10	3.13	3.05	3.10
4	4.40	4.20	4.28*	3.10	3.10	3.10*
5	3.60	3.63	3.62*	2.65	2.43	2.52*
6	1.92	1.60	1.73	1.60	1.80	1.72
7	2.36	2.00	2.15	1.95	2.00	1.98

NOTE: Mean responses with * are significantly different.
The larger the response, the more disagreement with the statement.
Range 1-5 (SA - SD).

Items:

1 Officials obviously do not want the real facts publicized, and the public relations director should abide by those wishes.

2 The public relations director is justified in misleading the reporter since the responsibility for that statement rests with others. The public relations person is simply acting as others' representative much a lawyer represents a client.

3 The public relations director is justified in misleading the reporter since he or she is merely protecting others.

4 The public relations director should abide by the wishes of the officials.

5 The public relations director is justified in telling the reporter the truth if he or she believes the officials are misleading the public.

6 The public relations director -- if he or she thinks the real situation must be explained -- should tell others involved in the situation about his or her own position before speaking to the reporter.

7 The public relations director -- if he or she thinks the real situation must be explained -- should sit down with the officials and try to convince them that all the facts should be released.

Table 2

Percentages Recommending Each of Five Possible Responses to Requests to Keep Secret the Reasons for the Resignation

	College Coach	Pro Coach	Mean Percentages
Explain management's position to the media and go no further.	60.0	62.9	61.7
Give the media the real reason why the coach is moving to the front office.	4.0	5.7	5.0
Resign the position and not talk with the media	16.0	11.4	13.3
Resign the position and tell the media why the coach is moving to the front office.	4.0	0.0	1.7
Other.	16.0	20.0	18.3

Table 3

Percentages Recommending Each of Five Possible Responses to Requests to Keep the Closing of the Disposal Site Secret

	Medical School	Commer. Lab	Mean Percentages
Display a response to the reporter's inquiry until the laboratory's officials say the information can be released.	25.0	36.7	32.0
Tell the press the real story about the waste disposal site.	25.0	10.0	16.0
Resign the position and not talk with the media.	10.0	13.3	12.0
Resign the position and tell the media the real reason about the waste disposal site.	10.0	10.0	10.0
Other.	30.0	30.0	30.0

Table 4

Percentages Recommending Each of Five Possible Responses to Requests to Keep the Situation Secret

	Coach	Waste Site	Mean Percentages
Explain management's position to the media and go no further.	61.7	32.0	48.2
Give the media the real reason.	5.0	16.0	10.0
Resign the position and not talk with the media.	13.8	12.0	12.7
Resign the position and tell the media why.	1.7	10.0	5.5
Other.	18.3	30.0	23.6